A HISTORY OF MINOR RULING POWERS IN BENGAL
(WEST BENGAL AND BANGLADESH) C.500-1300A.D.

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INTRODUCTION:-

The first and foremost question arises is that why I choose this topic for my research work? The simple answer is that I find it a quiet virgin land for moving forward. Since there is no comprehensive work in this subject, I choose this as my research topic. Great scholars like D.C.Sircar, N.G. Majumdar, A.K. Maitreya , R.C. Majumdar and Niharranjan Roy have worked in this field in pre-independence period. But all works have done on fractional basis. The last work to be published in this field is B.M. Morrison's Political Centres and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal, published in 1980. Since then dozens of inscriptions have been discovered with substantial progress in archaeology which needs further research and detailed study to trace the development of minor ruling powers in Bengal on a comprehensive basis.

This work aims to redefine the shadowy past of Bengal during the existence of Minor ruling powers in the time period of Circa 500A.D. to 1300A.D. Bengal in ancient period is a larger area comprising a wider landscape, which is now appeared as present day West Bengal, a state in India and the independent Bangladesh earlier East Pakistan since the partition during independence in 1947. The then Bengal was stretched from the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south, from Brahmaputra, Kangsa, Surma and Sajjuk rivers in the east to the Nagar, Barakar and the lower reaches of Suvarnarekha in the west. Four main river systems- the Padma, the Bhagirathi or Hoogly, the Brahmaputra and Meghna has divided the whole region into a number of sub region namely Varendra or Pundravardhana, Rada, Samatata etc. prior to administrative division.

The fate of Bengal as a political unit is being determined by a number of pan- Indian and regional powers from the beginning of historical period. Pundranagara(Baguda district, Bangladesh) was the chief administrative centre of the Mauryas as shown in Mahasthan inscription of c. 3rd century B.C. The Guptas also subdued a part of Bengal and used to rule here at least from the time of Kumaragupta I, if not earlier proved by a number of copper-plate inscription issued from Varendri region like Damodarpur copper-plate inscription of the time of Kumaragupta I- Gupta era 124(444A.D.). Gunaighar

copper-plate inscription of Vainyagupta- Gupta era 188(507A.D.), suggest that later Gupta kings with their feudatories used to rule at least in a part of Bengal independently, if not nominally. Most probably during the same time an independent minor power was ruling in Bardhamana bhukti upto Tippera in present Bangladesh under the rulers like Gopachandra, Dharmaditya and Samachardeva in the middle of 6th century A.D. corroborated by Faridpur copper-plate inscription of Gopachandra (regnal year18), of Dharmaditya (regnal year 3) etc. Political importance of Bengal as an independent state rises under Sasanka(606-637 A.D.) and disappears immediately with him, followed by long period of anarchy known as Matsanyaya. A number of minor powers reported to rule in Bengal in 7th C.A.D. The Khadga dynasty ruled the Vanga and Samatata in around 7th-8th c(c.A.D.625-710?) comes primarily from two copper-plates discovered at Ashrafpur. The Rata dynasty of Samatata is known at first from a single record, the Kailan copper-plate inscription of Shridharana Rata in 7th C.A.D. Another dynasty of the same period is reported from a copper-plate at Tippera of a feudal lord named Lokenath. However, this gape of any major ruling power is subsequently filled up by the emergence of Palas through the selection by the 'Prakritipunja', as stated in Khalimpur copper-plate grant. This dynasty ruled over a vast territory in a fairly long period of 300 years (c.A.D.750-1155). In this period also their power was curtailed and challenged by some minor powers like Kambojas in Rada, Maharaja Kantideva in Harikela and Chandras in Vanga(c.A.D.900-1049). Govindachandra of Chandra dynasty ruled in 'Vangala' during the expedition of Rajendra Chola as appeared in Tirumalaya inscription of C.1021A.D. and Betka-Paikpada Vasudeva image inscription of Govindachandra(c.A.D.1020-1055). Pala rule was ended by the Sena in 11th Century when the Varmans hold an important position in Bengal from their capital in Vikrampura(Bangladesh). The history of Varmans found in a number of inscriptions as Bhubaneswar stone inscription, Belava copper- plate grant of Bhojavarman (c.A.D. 1150) and also Deva dynasty from precisely the same region in C.A.D.1180-1281 as proved by Mehar copper-plate inscription of Damodara, Saka 1156(1234A.D.).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:-

_Many great scholars worked previously in this field. But the problem is most of them have done on fractional basis. Scholars like D.C.Sircar, N.G.Majumdar , Akshaya Kumar Maitreya have tried to discover, decipher and publish numerable inscriptions. Gauda- lekha-Mala of Maitreya and

Inscriptions of Bengal by N.G.Majumdar, though published prior to independence period are noted for scholarly representation. F.E.Pargiter and D.R.Bhandarkar's work in this field is also praiseworthy. Special reference should be made for B.M.Morrison's work for making excellent contribution.

Works carried out by R.C.Majumdar and Niharranjan Roy in their books 'The History of Bengal' and 'Bangalir Itihasa – Adi Parva' gave information about the political history of minor ruling powers in Bengal. This works are great advancement in respect of regional history. But their works lack definite chronology.

Archeological research work in this region, both excavation and exploration have been conducted by department of Archaeological Survey of India and of Bangladesh in colonial and post-independence period yielding to discovery of a number of archaeological relics, inscription and coins.

Subsequent works have been done to reconstruct the history of Bengal under minor ruling powers but they are not enough to produce a clear cut picture.

OBJECTIVES:-

The main objective of this research work is to reconstruct the history of Minor ruling dynasties of Bengal in the time-period of C.500-1300 A.D. on the basis of epigraphic sources. Inscriptions and coins are used to reconstruct fractional dynastic history but there is less effort to seek the nature of the states and their socio-economic- cultural background. The nature of the states under minor ruling powers is hitherto unknown, so as their administrative set up. As in the case of South-India, we find a number of small principalities, mostly feudal in character are present side-by-side with greater powers like the Cholas and playing important role in political scenario. Extensive researches in these regions enable us to have a comprehensive history of those powers, which is lacking in this field. Effort should be made to present chronology wise complete history of the minor dynasties in Bengal. Because of the absence of any relevant literary source in this field, inscriptions and coins are the main sources of study. Not a single inscription gives more information than that of the genealogy. Also inscriptions, legends on coins and very small amount of literary documents, who present glimpses of information, are not always trustworthy as they often can be biased, eulogistic or, shows any kind of subjectivity. As a matter of fact a number of inscriptions and coins are being unearthed, which are yet to be studied and published. So, this is also a challenge for a scholar working in this field to make good use of the available sources. Objective of the subsequent work is to understand the

polity and socio-economic-cultural formation of Bengal during the existence of minor ruling powers, based mainly on epigraphic materials. This work aimed to present a complete history of minor ruling powers of Bengal in C.A.D.500-1300.

PERIOD OF STUDY :-

I have sketched the rough time period for the study in this field in between 500-1300 A.D. This particular period shows important changes in political scenario of all over North-India as well as Bengal proper. Decline of the imperial Gupta power paved the way for the rise of smaller states under Maukharis, Pushyabhutis etc powers, who are mostly the feudatories of the Guptas. In Bengal also the yoke of Guptas began to fall, resulted in the emergence of great powers like Sasanka and Palas and small powers like Khadgas, Ratas and Nathas in different sub regions of Bengal. The vacuum started by the fall of Sasanka and ended with the advent of the Palas shows a century of anarchy. This period of simultaneous consolidation and dispersion went on up to 13th century A.D. marked by the introduction of Muslim rule in India. This period is also important in the sense that it shows great changes in political as well as social and economic set up in India, which in gross termed by some historian as 'feudalism'? Though whether we can accept this general overview or, defend it is a matter of controversy . The span of long 800 years can be best studied under the light of epigraphic sources. Epigraphs not only served as mines of information but also help to determine the dates of the kings, who issued them. As it is the most fascinating problem of Indian history to have definite dates of political events on account of absence of a generally accepted pan-Indian era like the Christian era prevailed in European countries. It is safe to carry forth with globally accepted year of our Lord , of the Christian era- B.C.(before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini).

SOURCE MATERIAL:-

The chief source to carry out the research work in this topic is a number of copper-plate inscriptions from various parts of Bengal. In fact inscription is the only source to have a fairly detailed account of some of the minor powers. For instance the existence of the Rata dynasty at first is only found from an

inscription, the Kailan copper-plate inscription of Sridharanrata, regnal year 8(c.665-675A.D.). This single inscription not only proves their existence but also gives a genealogical list of the dynasty with successive political feature and also helps a lot to produce a general date. This is the case of many other dynasties say for Mallasarul copper-plate inscription of Vijayasena, Ashrafpur copper-plate inscription of Devakhadga, Paschimbhag copper-plate inscription of Srichandra and many more. The find spot of the inscription helps to determine relative territory hold by those minor powers as in the case of the Chandras, who stated to be ruled in Vangala as shown Chola inscription of Tirumalaya and supported by Betka-paikpada Vasudeva image inscription of Govindachandra, which found in Dacca district of Bangladesh earlier known to be a subdivision called Vangala in accounts like Ain-i-Akhbari. Besides the grants resulted in the erection of copper-plate shows the religious inclination of the rulers of those minor dynasties, as the Tipperah copper-plate inscription of Lokenath shows not only his military achievement against Jivadharana of Rata dynasty but also his faith in god 'Anantanarayana', for whose worship he donated land.

Coins are also very helpful in this research work. Beside inscriptional sources coins gave some glimpses in the then history as in the case of Khadga king Balabhata, whose coins are in circulation in Samatata region as discovered and published by scholars and of Maharaja Kantideva in whose case coins are chief source of research. Excavations and exploration is also helpful to some extent.

Religious as well as secular literature gives a lot of information of ancient Bengal under minor ruling powers. 'Harshacharita' by Bana helps to know about political and religious condition of Bengal in the 7^{th} C.A.D. 'Ramacharita' by Sandhyakar Nandi is an important source. Foreign travelers like Yuan-Chwang, I-tsing and Sheng-Che give detailed account of the then Bengal in their tour diary. The Tibetan historian Lama Taranath's account 'History of Buddism in India' describes the kingdom of 'Vangala' under Chandras and Palas. 'Tarikh-I-Mubarak Shahi' vividly describes the treaty between Sultan Balban of Delhi and Dasarathadeva of Deva dynasty in Bengal.

METHODOLOGY:-

1. Collection of primary sources, inscription and coins by visiting museums and libraries and thorough analysis of them.

2. Collection and analysis of secondary sources from libraries.

3. Aims to understand and analyze literary sources whenever possible as a corroborative material other than inscriptions and coins.
4. Methods will be taken to understand cultural and political pattern.
    a. A through understanding of cultural life with understanding the process and nature of social, economic, religious formation and continuation of cultures.
    b. A general geomorphic study of this area will be attempted which serve the natural background for the information of minor ruling powers and also mapping those areas.

5. Attempts to present a definite chronology of those minor ruling powers of Bengal on the basis of available sources.

CHAPTER BREAKUP:-

1. Introduction – Earlier work – Critique – Aims of the research work.

2. Geomorphology and regional variation.

3. Political history – Chronology – Important political events extracted from epigraphic records.

4. Social – Economic – Cultural formation of Bengal during the presence of Minor ruling powers.

5. Conclusion.

Key words: Minor, Inscription, Land-grant, River-system, Trade

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